

NEA Oral History
Full text (edited) of "John Dunlop Oral History Transcript"

Interview with John Dunlop
Conducted on March 2, 2017 by Vakil Smallen

VS Today is March 2nd, 2017. This is Vakil Smallen. I am sitting down with John Dunlop to discuss his time working at NEA, a little about the time before that, and his working with education associations.

We can start with anything you would like, or I've got questions here and we could start with them.

JD Start with your questions.

VS What made you decide to start working with the Birmingham (MI) Education Association? You were a teacher in the school district at the time and what was it that got you in 1966 to start working with it?

JD Primarily it was due to my relationship with Walt Rogowski. He was a fellow teacher who I had done my student teaching with. He was, in the 1965-66 school year, vice president of the Birmingham Education Association and he worked in the same school as Don Cameron who was the president of the BEA at that time. I was going to law school and as a friend, Walt asked me if I would serve on the association committee he was heading up, the Professional Rights and Responsibilities Committee, or PR&R. I agreed to do so. Walt had a personal crisis, his mother was dying of cancer, and couldn't chair the weekly committee meetings for a time so he asked me if would do so and I agreed to do so.

The BEA was preparing for bargaining its first contract under the newly enacted state public employee bargaining law which was passed in 1964. I was going to law school at night and had had a course in labor law taught by a well known labor lawyer, George Roumell. George was a great teacher, a very good motivator. From that course I became interested in labor law and helping draft a grievance procedure for a new bargaining agreement was a nice way to further my interest. I found the whole process very interesting. That is how I got started in association work.

In the 1966-67 school year Cameron appointed me chair of the BEA Grievance committee which was to oversee the implementation of the bargaining agreement. The committee handled all the teacher grievances under that contract and was for me a great learning experience. It was expected that Walt Rogowski would step up to the presidency of the BEA, the election to be held in the spring of 1967. And Don Cameron was hired as the first paid executive secretary of the BEA that same year. As it happened, well before the election, Walt had a job offer to supervise a summer school for American students in England and felt he could not be an effective president by being away for the first three months of his presidency so he suggested

that I run for president. I ran for president and was elected. I won because I had the support of the long term leadership of the BEA, such as Don Cameron. I must confess it was that support that got me in because quite candidly I was not the most scintillating candidate for that office. I tended to be a nervous speaker and did not come across well in talking to large groups. But I think people had confidence in me because they felt I knew what I was talking about. I came across as knowledgeable.

In September, 1967 the BEA voted to go on strike. Don Cameron tells about the strike build up in his book Inside the Teachers' Revolution. We went on strike for about 15 days. I had taken the Michigan state bar exam in the summer of 1967 and had some fear my admission might be in jeopardy. Strikes were illegal in Michigan and there seemed to me some prospect that I might be thrown in jail for leading the strike. We were enjoined from carrying on the strike and Cameron and I convinced the membership that we had nothing to gain with more strikes days so we went back to work and continued to bargain. Now, Cameron as BEA executive secretary, was the BEA's chief bargainer. I was not but was on the bargaining team. The team reached an agreement with the school board in December, 1967. The teachers were in turmoil, there was a lot of bitterness. We bring the new contract to the teachers for ratification and they turn it down, big time. So now I'm faced with a choice, do I keep Don Cameron as chief negotiator. I told Don, and he readily agreed with it, that I was going to select another chief bargainer. My instincts told me to pick the loudest mouth in the group that turned the contract down. He always getting up at BEA meetings to say something. He was very loquacious. He presented a fiery image. He always talked tough. I picked him and in another of bargaining he really got no more than Cameron had gotten, maybe a little bit more.

Again the agreement is brought back to the teachers and as the ratification meeting progressed it became clear that the membership was going to turn this one down too. I must say Don Cameron came through. He demonstrated great moral courage. We were all stunned at seeing this contract going down. There were about 900 teachers in the room. The leaders in the front, me included, just sat there in disbelief, our mouths agape. Cameron stands up, goes to the podium and says, "All right people! How many bargaining teams are you going to go through? You've already gone through two. What will it be, three, four, how about five or six? Get with it people! There isn't any more! It's over!" The mood of the group changed just through that stand by Cameron and the contract was approved by a margin of 700 to 200, or thereabouts. Inevitably, when we asked the teachers for their reactions to the process and the contract in a written questionnaire, there were some bitter comments. One wrote, "You fucked us again, Dunlop!" Within any group of militants you have what I call barn burners, who tend to be more aggressive, demanding, and less flexible. There was certainly a coterie of such in the BEA. Cameron and I represented the majority of moderates, as did the guy I had picked to replace Cameron, Art Delvero. For all his tough talk, Delvero was thoughtful in many ways and fully understood the dynamics of collective bargaining. So we went back to work but the firebrand coterie remained angry, directing their anger at Cameron for what he had done at the ratification meeting.

My term as president ran out in June, 1968. At first I did not know that much about the Michigan Education Association but learned more as I interacted with more and more MEA staff. My contact with NEA was very minimal. Then in late January, 1968 a statewide strike in Florida offered an opportunity. NEA sent out a call nationwide to state and local association staff to come to Florida to help organize the strike. Cameron asked for a couple weeks leave to do so and I said "okay but take me along." He got the NEA to approve my participation and we flew off to Florida together. He was assigned one area and I assigned another. The strike was not very successful as it was really a confrontation with the governor. I think it was the first time that NEA had endorsed a state wide strike and it responded quite well pouring in a lot of resources, staff and money. Interestingly enough the NEA coordinator on site was a fellow by the name of Larry Sorenson who I got to know later on when I was employed by NEA. I is interesting that a number of people I would work with later in life I had met in Florida.

After our Florida experience Cameron got across his desk an NEA flyer listing job openings in NEA. One such opening was "negotiation specialist." Cameron said to me "why don't you apply for that?" adding that he would recommend me for the job. And I said, "Sure," feeling that I had some good credentials, a local association president, strike experience, a bona fide lawyer having been admitted to the Michigan Bar.

I was hired by NEA and started work for it in September, 1968. I had applied for various lawyer jobs but the NEA job seemed most intriguing to me. If I had stayed in Birmingham (MI) for the 1968-69 school year I would have earned \$8,500. I was paid \$14,000 by NEA. Financially it was a great move.

VS Going back to your time at BEA and your involvement with that strike, was that the first time? I know for NEA the Sixties was the time of collective bargaining and teacher striking starts to become an issue. I think in New York City in like 1960 they sort of tentatively supported the strike. So, BEA was an affiliate of NEA, not AFT?

JD The BEA was not an affiliate of AFT, but an affiliate of NEA.

VS Was this the first time that BEA had ever gone on strike?

JD Absolutely

VS So everyone with the Association was sort of feeling their way around this event I guess?

JD For background, it is critical to know that the public employee collective bargaining law in Michigan was passed in 1964. It was signed by Governor George Romney that year. The Michigan Education Association had fought the passage of the law. It didn't support it basically because it was a project that had been pushed by the United Auto Workers and their leader Walter Reuther and was fully supported by AFT units in Dearborn, Michigan and Detroit. It was passed. At the time, E. Dale Kennedy was the executive director the Michigan Education Association, an old line, grayed haired school administrator. To his everlasting credit, he stated

that the MEA was going to make the law work for the good of the MEA. He hired two attorneys. One was Erwin Ellmann, a Detroit labor lawyer, and one was Ted Swift from the western part of the state, Kalamazoo, I think. Together they sort of oversaw the MEA implementation of the bargaining law.

The MEA organized every local in the state telling them to seek and obtain recognition as the local bargaining agent. It was not going to concede anything to the AFT. Kennedy basically said MEA was going to fight, giving rise to the slogan "we're going to out union the union." It was a very aggressive stance. Don Cameron had been deeply enmeshed in the MEA effort. The MEA sent into Birmingham a staffer by the name of Morrie Andrews who shepherded us through the bargaining and the strike. He was a great, great resource.

The Michigan law clearly stated that strikes were illegal. The MEA lawyers concocted a theory that if teachers withheld signing their individual annual contracts and stayed out of work until they did, they were not on strike. And they wouldn't sign their individual contracts until the collective bargaining agreement had been agreed to.

The problem for us in Birmingham was not the bargaining law but the fact we had signed in 1966 (under president Don Cameron and vice president Walt Rogowski) a multi-year contract with a salary reopener in the second year, but which also contained a no strike clause. So we were not only striking against the law but our own contractual commitment.

In early September, 1967, I think Labor Day, we held a membership meeting the day before school was to open. At that meeting I took the position as president that we not strike. Some people thought that was a clever move on my part. It wasn't really. I didn't think a strike would work, mainly because over a period of time you exhaust yourself and members begin to fight each other. But the BEA executive board voted to strike. I had said when I recommended we not strike that "whatever we do we do together," so once the strike was approved I was fully in support of it. There were a lot of teacher strikes in Michigan in 1967.

The Birmingham School Board sought to enjoin our strike in an Oakland County court. Judge Beer in ordering the injunction stated he "didn't care what the state law says." He said he didn't care "what our collective bargaining agreement said. You have a sacred commitment to the children and students of Birmingham and that's why I am issuing this injunction." He had given us a truth sermon.

I kept track of what went on in Michigan for years after I left the state and about twenty years after the Birmingham strike I came across an item in the Detroit Free Press on Judge Beer. It seems he had two wives, one living in Oakland County and another in a town south of Detroit and he would commute back and forth between them. I immediately called Don Cameron to call his attention to this bit of news and we both hooted and hollered. Here was the guy who had read us a religious tome on why we were so wrong morally in striking against the kids. As a member of the Michigan Bar I have access to an online forum for lawyers and about a year ago I

read the comments of lawyers who had appeared before Judge Beer. In reading their comments on his eccentricities, I thought boy that's the guy I remember.

We were certainly fought the AFT, but that was not our primary motivation. In Birmingham there was no AFT rival. The AFT existed only in Detroit, Dearborn and maybe a another place like Benton Harbor. The AFT was an urban organization and Michigan was for the most part an suburban and rural state. So there was no significant rivalry statewide. The MEA blew the AFT off the map. So there wasn't a rivalry like there was in New York, or even Florida.

The MEA was the catalyst of bargaining success in Michigan and E. Dale Kennedy was a man not bound by his previous experience as a school administrator. He quickly recognized it was a new day and said "Okay we are going to bargain." He organized and led the MEA in that effort.

If you look at when certain staff people were hired by NEA in the 1960s you can see that many had militant action experience with state and local associations. One of the first groups to come in before I was hired was Ken Melley's group out of Connecticut. There was Ralph Flynn, Ken Melley, Ray Edwards, Vinny Kiernan, and Jim Gaffney. Gaffney would work in New York state and was sadly killed in an automobile accident. They all had bargaining experience in Connecticut before Michigan had its bargaining law.

After Michigan started bargaining a whole slew of us were hired by NEA. In September, 1968 I was assigned to NEA's Midwest Regional office in Chicago, IL. The director of that office was Gene Preston who had been executive secretary of the Saginaw, Michigan local association. Also newly hired was Morris Andrews who had been the MEA field staff who helped us in Birmingham. And Ken Melley, who headed an organizing team out of the Chicago office, hired Chip Tassone who had been an MEA public relations man who helped us out in Birmingham.

All the Michigan people hired by NEA were often referred to as "the Michigan Mafia." It was because we were seen as militants. I must say that I was in many ways a reluctant militant. But the Michigan experience taught me one thing, as Don Cameron would said, if you kick people in the shins, they listen to you.

I bargained for NEA from 1968 to 1974 when I left direct field work and became a headquarters person. My bargaining was the Michigan style. If you threaten strike, you had better be able to carry one out. So I looked to the strike weapon in bargaining. It clearly provided significant leverage. Wherever I went and wherever I bargained I tended to fall back on the strike as a weapon and would say that I was successful about fifty percent of them time. Some strikes were brutal. One of the last ones I was engaged in was in the City of Baltimore in 1974.

Maryland did not have a bargaining law but rather a "negotiation" statute which had minimal oversight machinery. It allowed you to talk to the school board but not much beyond that. The statute contained a provision that if a local negotiating agent went on strike, it would lose its representational rights. The Baltimore association went on strike and it lost its representational rights.

Dale Robinson an NEA staffer and I were sent into Baltimore as co-bargainers, which is another story. But anyway, we went in and bargained hard. The board representatives sat back and chuckled at our antics saying in effect “so you think you will strike?” And our behavior was “yeah we will strike.” They were satisfied we really wouldn’t because we would lose our representational rights and at one point said that to us directly. My response was, “you’re giving us an option, live on our knees or die standing upright. I would rather die upright than live on our knees.” We went on strike. I can’t say it was a successful strike, but it wasn’t a disaster either and sure enough the association lost its representational rights.

That’s how I bargained in Hawaii in 1971, I think it was. I was selected to be the chief negotiator of the Hawaii Teachers Association after a successful representational election against the AFT headed by NEA organizer Ken Melley. I had worked in that representational election and got to know the local leaders and they were comfortable with me being the association’s chief bargainer. I was with my whole family in Hawaii for almost a year.

I followed the same bargaining pattern. Bargain hard, threaten strike, and organize for a strike. We went out on strike but only for a day.

Hawaii had but one school system state wide so it was closely tied to the state government. As soon as we looked like we were really going to strike the governor, John Burns, intervened in the bargaining. He called me and Al Hamai the executive secretary of the Hawaii Teachers’ Association to the governor’s mansion and asked us “do you really want to settle this.” And we said, “any way we can governor.” He told us he was going to bring his own representative into the bargaining, one Elmer Cravalho the mayor of Maui, basically supplanting the school board in the bargaining. The chief bargaining for the school board had been Jack Reynolds an old longshoreman bargainer. He didn’t know anything about teacher bargaining and seemed overwhelmed by it. He was not doing a very good job. But he wanted to remain chief bargainer.

Cravalho and I bargain up to the last hour literally and go to the governor’s office to sign the final deal. Jack Reynolds and Al Hamai are also there. We sit around the governor’s desk and hear a radio Burn’s has on in his office and we are putting the finishing touches on the agreement, “We can buy this, we can live that. What about your Jack can you live with that? Yeah I can.” We are ready to ink the agreement and over the radio comes the voice of our PR man Barry Abel saying “The strike is on!” Reynolds drops his pen saying “I will not sign this contract under the threat of a strike,” and he gets up and walks out. I look at the governor, saying “Can’t you tell him to sign it, governor?” Burns say “Ah, that’s just Jack. Just wait a couple of hours, he’ll come back.” So we cool our heels for two hours and sure enough Jack Reynolds comes back and still fuming signs the agreement. But before Al and I sign it, I say to the governor, “We have another problem.” Burns says, “What’s that?” I tell him because of

Reynolds the teachers have lost a day's pay. Burn says "Yeah, you are right. I'll just call it a holiday." And then he looks at me and says, "Understand one thing, this isn't because of you. I have to deal with my brother in law who is the head of the custodians' union and I don't want to have any trouble with him." So, that was it.

VS Going back a little bit to your time at the BEA during that first strike and how you had to explain to members that it was illegal for them to strike and Don had to go before them and say hey let's just take this deal because we're not going to keep negotiating forever, and when you were with NEA as a field representative going to the various associations who were on the verge of a strike, I have two questions. At what point did you come and get involved? Were you in from the beginning when they were doing the bargaining, or did you come in after they started?

JD I usually came in during a crisis, but in important bargaining I would be assigned from the beginning. That was true in Hawaii and Baltimore. I also bargained from the beginning in a small, but important Illinois local association, in the town of Bremen and in a few other places. For example, when I was just hired by NEA my direct supervisor Gene Preston told me I was going to Rapid City, South Dakota telling me they were on the verge of a strike. So I got on a plane and flew to Rapid City and met an NEA field rep there, Ed Robran. Ed had a whole lot of things going on all over his territory and told me I had to take over from him in Rapid City. So I am thrown at the bargaining table. And in states like South Dakota where there was little long, drawn out bargaining the state association staff tended to defer to experienced NEA on bargaining matters. That wasn't always the case because some state association staff didn't want us around and resisted our "taking over." That was not the case in South Dakota.

We bargained almost to agreement one long night. On the school board bargaining team was an Episcopalian minister who was a pain in the ass. We had bargained well into the morning to reach a deadline. Bargaining to a deadline tends to focus the bargainers making them more open to agreement, both you and the other side. So we were close to an agreement when a school board member, who apparently heart problems, started having trouble and the Episcopalian minister said we should stop bargaining and come back the next day. I was uneasy with that knowing that if you give people time to think about a given deal, they might turn it down. I protested and the board guy said "Oh, no, no, we'll come back and we'll just wrap it up." I said "That is unlikely. We've got to wrap it now." And they continued to protest, saying the board man with the heart problem could die, or something. So, sure enough, we came back the next day at noon and the deal we had the night before was gone. They had thought about it and they said no. We had to shut the strike down and the teachers went back to work without a bargaining contract.

That happened in Baltimore too in 1974. We were enjoined, and went back to work but we did ultimately get the teachers an agreement. But as in Hawaii local politics played a big role. Mayor William Donald Schaefer sent his people to the bargaining table, taking the bargaining over from the school board. We dealt with the mayor's people but reached impasse and we got the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service to get involved. The director of FMCS, Bill Usery,

came into Baltimore and helped settled the agreement. And NEA general counsel Bob Chanin played a role. He handled the legal issues such as fighting the injunction the school board was trying to obtain and skillfully handled the court hearing. Bob was a skillful bargainer often using typical lawyer methods of getting bargainers off to the side to talk about what could be done, rather than push litigation.

VS You mentioned Michigan, the AFT and the NEA, you know, the NEA sort of dominated Michigan as a state, but as you started going out into, you know joined the NEA and you start going into different areas, there must have been times when you were up against the AFT, or maybe there was a certain district that was considering who they were going to go with. Did you get a sense that the NEA had to prove some credibility in

this sort of new era, where they embracing collective bargaining, that various affiliates, various educational associations kind of felt like the NEA needed to prove itself?

JD To a degree, yes. I would get AFT people in meetings when I spoke to local associations on bargaining matters, in New Trier and Rockford, Illinois and in Portland, Oregon. They were there. But I could say, "listen I have been in twelve, thirteen strikes, so don't talk to me about militancy. If we have to strike we'll strike. We can be as tough as anybody." I remember in one meeting a person saying "Gee, I never heard an NEA guy talk like that." So I never felt I had to demonstrate beyond a certain point my credentials. I remember one person in a meeting asking "Where have you bargained." And I ran off all the places I had bargained, in Michigan, Indiana, Kentucky, naming the school districts and listing who went on strike. And the response was "well that sounds okay."

One thing I learned from MEA was being well organized for bargaining. From the very beginning the MEA believed in something called coordinated bargaining, although it was not called that initially. Basically, MEA went to every bargaining table in Michigan with the same bargaining contract proposals. It had a model agreement with model clauses for every issue. It also had a budget analysis process that would give a bargainer an instant analysis of where the money was.

I went into a small Michigan school district, Summerfield, probably having 200 to 300 teachers, when it was facing a crisis on Labor Day. I walk in and say to the president, "Did you fill out the MEA handbook of budget analysis?" And he said, "Oh, yeah, I got it right here." So I quickly reviewed the financial circumstances of the school district and looked at the rainy day fund, or slush fund. The handbook analysis included past years and I noted that the fund had grown over the years from \$200,000 to over a million dollars. I concluded quickly that where we could find the funds for our contract offer. At the bargaining table I played the innocent. "I was just looking at this item, it's called a contingency fund. Could you tell me what's it for?" And they say, "well that's in case there's a tornado and a roof gets blown off one of our schools." And then I say, "Oh, have you had many of those over the five years, because I have noticed it has grown."

The interesting thing about that Summerfield bargaining was that the state supplied mediator for handling the impasse was my old labor law professor from Detroit College of Law, George Roumell. When I met him I told him I had taken his class but probably didn't remember me. He said he did not remember me but seemed pleased to know that. As the night wore on he pulled me aside and asked me, "Tell me what you need exactly." In looking at the budget and costing the salary proposal of the association I told him we needed \$86,000. And then he asked, "Do you think they have that?" And I told him looking at their books I said they did. And he goes off to talk to them and I don't see him for hours. He comes back and says, "I got it. I got the \$86,000." So, we seal the deal and the teachers go to work the next day.

George Roumell was well known and worked very hard as a mediator. However, you could get at cross purposes with a mediator and the state of Michigan had a whole stable full of them. I remember I was bargaining in Fenton, another small Michigan community, and the state sent a mediator in. I had told the association bargaining team that they had to make the mediator work for them. Don't just sit by and do all the work yourselves. Let the mediator do his thing, that's why he's here. After this and during a bargaining break the mediator comes up to me and says "I hear you are undercutting me." I asked him what did he mean. "You told them they had to make me work" and then pointed a finger at me and said "You know, I am going to make sure you don't ever work in Michigan again." I smiled at him and said, "I'll go you one better. You won't ever work in another MEA mediation again, and I can fix that." He knew that the MEA could strike his name from a list of proposed mediators in any bargaining crisis. He walked away and we settled the contract. It was simply part of the bargaining process.

I enjoyed bargaining a lot but it took me away from home quite a bit. I was gone from my new family and that was burdensome. I got to go to a lot of different places. I was involved in the statewide strike in Kentucky in 1970. That was another losing statewide strike but it was very interesting. Working in various states I got to know a lot of people who later became my colleagues at NEA. One was Vade Bolton on the Kentucky staff during the strike. He was hired by NEA, another example of activist experience being important to NEA. Vade and I worked together in the Leadership Development Academy for many years.

VS You mentioned a while back that sometimes you'd go into an association that's in the middle of bargaining or a crisis or something and they wouldn't want you to get involved. So, I guess what was your role? Was your role whatever they want you to do, kind of?

JD Basically I was an organizer. If they simply wanted advice, that was fine. If they wanted me to take over the bargaining that was fine. Sometimes I could slip in advice. They would turn to me and ask what to do and that would give me an entry. I played it by ear. There was never a rote methodology, but usually if it were a crisis they had already cried for help, not knowing what to do. If it was a first effort at bargaining they faced some technicalities and what differentiated an experienced person was being able to anticipate what was going to happen. I would lay out a decision tree. If you do this, then these are the possible results from that. Inexperienced people had a difficult time anticipating what might happen from a given action.

I was in NEA's Midwest regional office based in the Chicago area for two years and then transferred to the NEA Northwest regional office based out of Seattle. The state associations in the Northwest hadn't really experienced hard bargaining. In that area I basically trained people, mostly state staff in bargaining techniques. We did have a bargaining brouhaha in Portland, Oregon. Under the Oregon negotiating statute at that time only local leaders could be bargaining spokespersons at the bargaining table. So I could not be a table bargainer there. As a matter of fact I couldn't even get in the bargaining room and had to wait outside and the during breaks discuss with the bargaining what to do. It was very frustrating. I didn't take the advice of a very good NEA organizer by the name of Arnie Erickson. Arnie was a former naval pilot in World War II, flying off carriers. He had been in Portland before me and he said "John, we should get radios, when they won't let us in the room, and we'll have the chief association bargainer interrupt the bargaining by saying in needed to consult with us and then use the radio asking us what did we think, etc. I didn't do that.

VS Did you ever find yourself as a sort of voice of moderation or almost opposing association leaders?

JD Yes, but I can't think of any specific instance. The closest one I recall happened in small town in Michigan. I was working out of the NEA Midwest regional office helping the MEA as it faced so many potential strikes. I was assigned a given area, and drive around to the various local bargaining sites. Just popped in. At this one site I dropped in when the bargaining team could not agree on what to do. They were split between going on strike or not. A common criticism of NEA staff was that they simply "popped in, popped off, and popped out." So I am sitting with the team and I push them into being militant by asking them are they going to live like cowards. I really didn't use the word cowards but said they shouldn't be wishy washy and the militants on the team liked that and the team took a vote and voted to strike. Whereupon I left and late read about the strike in a newspaper and it wasn't going very well. I did feel a twinge of guilt.

No bargaining situation was the same as the last one. An organizer had to go with his or her instincts, guided by experience. One thing I never did was to paint a rosy picture about going on strike. In every instance I said they would be going against the law and they needed to understand they could be fired and that a school board probably could make that stick and they could be fined, and if they ignored an injunction they could be put in jail. I told them not to fool themselves that it would be easy. And I told them strikes tended to last a long time particularly if the parties are far apart. A strike will cost them money. They will go without pay and they had to figure out how they were going to handle that. I didn't mince words and some shook their heads in dismay but they went into it knowing it would be a tough fight.

The MEA did a number of things that I thought were smart. One was that the teachers were withholding services, not striking. They did not use picket lines in the first years of bargaining in Michigan, but may done that in later years. For our tougher strikes we did use picket lines. The MEA strategy tied in with the legal strategy around not striking but withholding services and not signing the individual contract until the collective bargaining contract was signed.

I can say that Erwin Ellmann, the MEA attorney, was not happy with the BEA striking with a no-strike clause in its existing collective bargaining agreement. He was preparing his argument before the Michigan Supreme Court in what was called the Holland Case that teachers were not striking in Michigan. He was afraid the BEA action would queer the validity of MEA's position. As it turned out, just after the BEA strike, the Michigan Supreme Court ruled in classic equity fashion that although teacher strikes were illegal, if a school board sought an injunction they would have to demonstrate they did nothing to precipitate that strike. That was certainly a win for MEA. If you look at the data teacher strikes continued to rise nationwide until I think 1981, with I recall 187 strikes that year, and then dropped off precipitously in the following years.

I believe that the increased number of teachers strikes was tied to the rise in inflation over those years. The period from 1971 to 1981 was a time of high inflation so it was a constant battle to get a decent wage at the bargaining table. The irony is that inflation was running at say 10 or 12 percent and we were getting settlements of 8 or 9 percent below inflation, but they looked good. When inflation petered out after Volker took over the Federal Reserve in the 1980s we were getting settlements of 2 and 3 percent. Inflation had cooled to like 2.5 percent and our teachers were complaining they weren't getting the 8 percent they were used to. We agreed but their actual earnings were better but they didn't see that.

VS You mentioned 1981, and obviously Reagan was president and he had famous standoff with the air traffic controllers. Did you see a cut in bargaining and strikes? Was the NEA seen as more and more a left wing organization? I know that in the 1980s NEA started to see more attacks from the right against it.

JD I think, in all candor, NEA wanted it both ways, to be seen as a militant organization advocating for employees but at the same time to be seen as a professional organization promoting the public good through education. It still has this conflict of goals. One of the goals in the creation of NEA was to promote education which then morphed into promoting public education. Then NEA became a spokes element for a specific group of education employees. I think one of the great moments in NEA history that really gave rise to the partisan attacks on it was the 1976 presidential campaign which NEA leaped into with both feet and helped get Carter nominated and then elected. Before that the "teachers' union" was the AFT and NEA was the professional organization. Up to that point generally NEA had a lobbying component but no Political Action Committee. It was not really that politically active. One of things that intrigued everybody was that NEA had members in every congressional district in the country, so why can't we mobilize these in some way that will affect political outcomes? We had been feeling our oats in collective bargaining and it was an easy step to marshaling the troops for political action. As soon as that happened we invited political retribution, particularly from the Republicans. I think they saw us simply as a wing of the Democratic Party, and I also think to a certain extent that was true.

. VS You mentioned that strikes were dropping off in '81 and you mentioned inflation dropping off, but did you also find that you were facing more resistance with Reagan coming in, with a new conservative movement coming in?

JD To a certain degree, but I think the dynamics are much more complicated. Private sector union saturation was also dropping off then, going down from a high point of 34, 35 percent of the private sector work force. What you have to understand (this is the history guy speaking) is that our collective bargaining model for public employees was based on the National Labor Relations Act. We worked to enact state laws that mirrored the NLRA, such as the Michigan Public Employees Relations Act. The NLRA was a conflict management system and the reason it enjoyed policy support from both Republicans and Democrats is that it controlled labor/management conflict. But as union saturation increased in the private sector conflict seemed to abate so the NLRA sort of lost its reason for being in a sense. After 1970 there were few private sector strikes that had significant economic consequences, not like the old coal miner or steel worker strikes, or any other strike that could really affect the national economy.

The United Steel Workers saw a drop in their membership. At their peak they had a million, a million and a half members. Today they have far fewer than 500,000 actual steel workers. So there was a private union decline and the sense among policy makers, include moderate Republicans who believed in collective bargaining. George Romney as governor of Michigan and former president of an automobile company, American Motors, saw collective as a valid public policy tool. We in the private sector inherited many of the precepts of bargaining under the NLRA. The NLRA was in fact a compromise and unions were limited to bargaining over hours, wages, and working conditions. How the plant was run and other management issues were off the bargaining table. We ran into that in our bargaining, like class size. We argued it was a working condition. Management argued it was management policy. In fact, it was both. We litigated that issue under state bargaining law trying to win it as a mandatory bargaining issue, while school boards argued it was only a permissive issue which they could choose to ignore in bargaining.

VS So you mentioned the NLRA I guess as having less teeth as private sector unions started to shrink in number. Was there a kind of evolution of the laws allowing public sector unions to bargain, strike, whatever? I mean, striking often seems like it was illegal, but in some states public sector unions aren't allowed to bargain. Did you see an evolution of laws, or was there no evolution of laws restricting it as time passed?

JD There were reactions like limiting what could be bargained. From about 1963 in New York to 1984 with the passage of a law in California was the period when new state legislation tended to mirror the NLRA. There were laws like those in Tennessee and New Mexico that did not have the administrative machinery to support bargaining. Michigan had a permanent oversight board as did Hawaii and Pennsylvania. During that same period we were trying get the legal right to strike. We got that in Hawaii and in Pennsylvania too. But our impetus died out in the middle 1970s. One of the critical moments I think for NEA came at that time.

Two administrative elements of the NEA Division of Affiliate Services handled bargaining issues, one was Organizing and the other Bargaining. I supervised a about twenty some bargaining specialists spread out all over the country and Ray Edwards, the organizing manager, had the same number of organizing specialists. The Director of NEA Communications at the time was Susan Lowell-Butler. The three of us sat down one day and talked about pooling our staff resources in an all- out effort to get bargaining in southern states. We called it the Southern Organizing Committee, or SOC. We started to develop plans to send into targeted southern states teams of organizers, bargainers and public relations people.

That plan horrified a number of people in NEA who believed if we did that, we could split the southern state Associations. Many of them had already gone through a difficult process of joining together the African American teachers' associations and the white teachers' associations. It had been a very tough battle to do so.

Also at the same time NEA was working on a unified dues program. When I first came into teaching I had a choice. I could belong to the Birmingham Education Association for \$2, to the Michigan Education Association for \$5, and the National Education Association for \$10.

I could belong to one, or I could belong to all three. Unified dues meant going through a process which mandated if you belonged to one you had to belong to all three and that meant changing state and local governance documents. Unification was tough fight that took time.

So our SOC strategy was bound up in the merger of black and white local and state associations and membership unification. Putting collective bargaining into the mix was a problem. Terry Herndon the NEA executive secretary at the time and Gary Watts the head of Affiliate Service did not actively promote the SOC strategy. And the regional director in the South, Jimmy Williams, a good guy, a good man said basically "you can't do that, it will just destroy us. I can't have you going into Georgia. I already have trouble in Georgia. I have trouble in Alabama." Or maybe he said "I don't have trouble in Alabama but if you go in there, I will have trouble." That was the end of NEA's drive to aggressively push collective bargaining nationwide. It signaled the end.

What we ended up doing in the southern states was foster it where it existed, for example in some locals in North Carolina. But there it wasn't really going anywhere in the south because it would need organizers who pushed it. The southern state associations generally were not on board with collective bargaining.

When I was hired and assigned to NEA's Midwest regional office and Illinois being one of the states of that region, the Illinois state association really didn't promote collective bargaining. Gene Preston, Morrie Andrews and I decided to promote it in the state and in true organizing fashion we'd go out into the locals, talk to teachers, identify leaders that were militant and get them involved, train them up and get them to put a collective bargaining agreement in front of the school board and demand bargaining rights.

VS As a field representative did you ever do into any of those integrating associations?

JD No, I never did.

VS You didn't play any role in that part?

JD No, I was involved in unification, the unified dues effort. Basically going into locals and telling everybody in the local how good unification would be. I think it was Ken Melley who said unification was a big deal for NEA. I recall a little retirement breakfast Dale Lestina and I had for Ken at the Jefferson hotel and Dale asked Ken a very perceptive question, "Ken, what's the most important thing NEA ever did in your tenure here?" And Ken, without hesitation, said, "Unified dues." He was right, because if NEA had been left to recruiting members directly it would have lost. I recalled my first year of teaching in Birmingham when a little old lady teacher came up to me and asked me if I would join the association. I asked "what's that?" She said for \$2 I could join the BEA, for another \$5 I could join the MEA, and for another \$10 I could join the NEA. I said "I'll join the BEA." Ken was absolutely right. The UniServ program which was begun by NEA in 1970 help sell the concept of unification as NEA would contribute one third of the cost of local association staffing, and would train local staff and leaders. These programs promoted organizational cohesion.

VS One of your roles then would be going in to, say Alabama, and convincing teachers that they wanted to do this, to vote for unification.

JD I worked in two states on unification, Massachusetts and Texas. It was a lot easier sell in Massachusetts. In Texas we ran into the complaint that NEA was just a "union" and that the Texas association would then become a union. We would try to tell them they would still run the state association. Many were skeptical. There were such tensions in certain states, Louisiana, to a certain extent Georgia, and Mississippi. They were split between the militants and the professionals and on racial matters. The southern states that were well integrated were those who had very credible black leadership and credible white leadership working together. Alabama I think was a classic example. Paul Hubbard was the executive director of the AEA and his immediate assistance was Joe Reed, an African American who had political clout in Alabama, as did Hubbard. So both of them were credible and the AEA was a good solid, cohesive organization. The same was true in Tennessee But that wasn't true in Georgia, Louisiana, or Mississippi where many white teachers left and formed professional associations. The NEA affiliates were dominated by African American leaders and were weaker because of that fragmentation. It was a product of racism. Although in Texas and Missouri I think the split was more on professional v. union lines. In New York the split was between AFT and NEA. Internal political dynamics made state affiliates more or less cohesion depending on the state and the issues that were at play.

States like Kentucky never had a bargaining law, nor did Mississippi, or Arkansas. States like Oklahoma and Maryland had relatively weak negotiation statutes that did not mirror the NLRA. The laws did not have oversight agencies that could enforce the mandates of the law. In

Michigan you could file an unfair labor practice against a school board for not bargaining in good faith. They had to bargain on hours, wages, and working conditions. The oversight agencies would attempt to resolve intractable bargaining disputes. Michigan's was a good law as were the ones in Pennsylvania, Hawaii, Massachusetts, New Jersey and California, after it dumped its "negotiation" statute.

VS So my understanding, if I'm remembering from looking through the collection of our history of the association, is that Missouri is the only state that disaffiliated because they wouldn't unify. It was the same difficulty in Texas, and you worked in Texas, do you remember what went right in Texas? How come it didn't disaffiliate?

JD I didn't work all that much in Texas, but whatever happened always depended on the credibility of local leaders. We had to insure there were such leaders, and if we didn't have them we were in trouble. An outsider was suspect; they had to hear from someone they knew.

I recall an incident in a representation election with the AFT of all places, Fargo, North Dakota. NEA sent three organizers in, me being one, and we divided up the buildings and spoke to the faculties in each one. I went with the president of the local association to a high school and she asked me if I would introduce her to the faculty. She was nice, little old lady, a classic leader when the association was more social than activist. There were about fifty teachers in the room and I gave my pitch as to why they should vote the local association in, about a 15 minute punch up and then I said, "Now, I would like to introduce your president." And they all got up and left the room. I'm not kidding you. Well not all of them, but a good number. After that meeting I told the other two organizers we were going to lose the election. And we did. I could tell members how good the NEA was but they weren't listening to that, they were looking at the local association leadership.

VS As time passed, what was the relationship with AFT? I think there was a lot of talk in 1998 of actually merging with AFT.

JD I retired from NEA in January, 1998. But it was clear to me we were moving closer to the AFT. I had been working closely with the AFT staff on the Clinton healthcare reform effort and such was expected by the NEA leadership. I recall going with NEA president Keith Geiger to an AF of L meeting and getting the only chuckle I ever got from a large group. I was to introduce Keith to the large gathering and said as intro "You know, unlike the AF of L, NEA is not of one mind about health reform." That got the chuckle.

Speaking of health reform, it was a very difficult issue internally for NEA. Trump saying "who it was so complicated" is laughable. He doesn't know history. I recall going to Maine to tell them of what NEA was doing in health care reform and they asked why were we supporting that? The same was true in Michigan. Both states had excellent health insurance programs. My response was "Because the teachers in Tennessee need it."

So to return to your question, we were working ever more closely with AFT up to the time of my retirement. In a large measure this was due to Don Cameron's leadership. He was a classic schmoozer, always working with people and not getting hung up on ideology. It was both his strength and his weakness. He was managing conflict, both inside and outside the organization. Cameron in his book (*Inside the Teachers' Revolution*) admired how the AFT leader Al Shanker could say and do things that if Don said them, he would be burned at the stake. That was due in a large measure because no one in the AFT questioned where Al Shanker's heart was. If Al Shanker supported merit pay, AFT members would look at each other and say, "That's old Al, isn't he clever because we know what he really believes in." An NEA leader could not think of doing that. Cameron loved that flexibility in the AFT. He had a great description for it—the difference between the NEA and AFT was that NEA was like a battleship taking several miles to turn around while the AFT was like a PT boat able to turn in a heartbeat.

VS Touching off that, I know there was a sort of longstanding conflict within the NEA wanting to be seen as a professional organization and at some point embraced becoming a union. I imagine today there's a little bit of a conflict between wanting to be seen as a professional association and wanting to be seen as a union. One of the things I noticed was early on, late sixties, early seventies the term was "professional negotiations." Was that just a marketing tool, or was there actually substantive difference between that and what later became collective bargaining?

JD There was a substantive difference and NEA wanted that difference. When NEA came out with professional negotiations the likes of William Carr, the executive secretary and one of his assistants Lawrence Derthick were old line NEA types seeing the NEA as this huge professional organization and they made it clear that they did not want it to become a labor union and under NLRA like laws it would become a labor union. They thought that NEA would lose its status as an umbrella organization of all education professionals. They were right, that is what happened. The professional negotiation concept said that number one local associations would not be under a labor board and number two whatever constituted the unit for negotiations would include both management and rank and file employees. This was not allowed under the NLRA. Managers were out of bargaining units because they could affect the outcomes of bargaining. So between the two concepts there was stark philosophical difference. There was only one problem. The NEA was facing a potent rival in the AFT. What happened shows the genius of some people leading the NEA at the time.

I think Allan West, he was an assistant executive secretary, did more to change NEA than anybody else by a decision he made. AFT was supporting collective bargaining and NEA was unfamiliar with it. West went to many meetings of various influential groups in America, like the American Manufacturers association. One meeting he attended was that of the American Bar Association and there he met a lawyer of a New York labor law firm, Kaye, Scholer, Fierman, Has and Handler, a prestigious law firm that handled collective bargaining for management. So as NEA searched for support to address collective bargaining he remembered that lawyer and contacted that lawyer asking if Kaye, Scholer would be interested in helping NEA. The lawyer said its business had been on the side of management but said it was willing to help NEA. The

lead lawyer for the firm helping NEA was Don Wollett. For anybody schooled in the principles of the National Labor Relations Act the concept of professional negotiations looked a bit fuzzy on critical matters such as “meet and confer” not being collective bargaining. There were not mandatory subjects of bargaining. So Wollett directed NEA toward real collective bargaining and it ended up hiring people like me, Don Cameron, Chip Tassone, Morrie Andrews, and Gene Preston out of Michigan who had collective bargaining experience. Although when I was hired NEA still talked about professional negotiations, I didn’t, simply saying it was another name for collective bargaining.

Harvey Zorbaugh an NEA regional director tells the story of In the mid-sixties of going to the Kaye, Scholer firm in New York city, to me a lawyer by the name of Bob Chanin who was working in New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Connecticut. And Harvey recounted going into his plush, oak paneled reception area and asking for a Mr. Chanin and he was directed to head to the back of the offices, past the carpeted area onto linoleum and a small back office where Chanin worked. Chanin was hired as by NEA as a staff attorney in 1967, or 1968 and with a few short years became NEA’s general counsel. If you looked the 1968 NEA Handbook you would note a lot of lawyers sprinkled throughout NEA, like in the PR&R Commission. There were many “Commissions” and they all died out.

There was even a separate entity called the Association of Classroom Teachers within NEA. When collective bargaining came in people wondered why that existed so that died out, finally killed by the constitutional reforms in 1972. The head of the Association of Classroom Teachers was one Margaret Stephenson and in her day she was a powerful NEA figure. The Executive Secretary at the time was Sam Lambert who had come out of NEA Research the locus of NEA administrative power in 1968 as was the NEA Journal under Mildred Fenner. Lambert, West, Stephenson, Fenner, and NEA legislative director John Lumley were the key players in the mid 1960s directing NEA. But it was Allan West who was really scrambling to make sure NEA survived in its fight with the AFT.

VS It’s interesting you made a comment now that made me think of something. So you mentioned the legislative department as a big power within NEA. I have read that NEA was very hesitant until about the late 1960s, I think 1969, to really have a very vigorous stance on legislation.

JD That’s true, except NEA was engaged in traditional lobbying. You know back room input. What came to the fore was political action being tied to legislation efforts and that was not really robust until the mid-1970s. NEA created a PAC and endorsed political candidates then. But in the before that, NEA legislative people could insinuate themselves on Capitol Hill simply by having the aura of representing a professional organization. They knew what they were talking about and NEA support public education. When the ESEA was passed under President Johnson NEA had role in its passage and basked in having done so. But NEA was not aggressive like it was later on. That aggressiveness came out of political action rather than traditional lobbying.

VS You mentioned earlier about working on health care reform. In 1994 at the NEA Representative Assembly Hillary Clinton was a guest speaker. I couldn't find a text of her talk but I found a reference that part of her talk was on the health care reform bill which was still viable. She asked NEA to endorse it. I looked up the NEA Resolutions that came out of that RA and there's no specific resolution in support of it. There was a resolution that children should receive universal health care.

JD Actually I don't know. I would have to go back and check. I was involved in health reform and recall we did have a resolution that did not speak directly to the Clinton reform effort but spoke to NEA supporting any effort that lead to better health insurance for teachers generally. We would support a single payer system, that's what we preferred, but we would support any effort that move us closer to that goal. I don't remember if that was the '94 RA or the '95 RA, I would have to go back and look.

VS That's interesting. I guess maybe it did happen a year later, so maybe it was too early to call.

JD One of the things you have to keep in mind is that NEA was deep into the Democratic Party. President Clinton saw NEA as a significant player and I don't know when exactly, but one of our chief lobbyists, Debra DeLee became chairperson of the Democratic National Committee in '98 or thereabouts.

I recall that in the midst of Clinton health care reform effort that Hillary wanted to talk to NEA president Keith Geiger and Debra DeLee. I joined them as the one with the technical knowledge. The backstory is that Keith wanted me because I wouldn't ask a lot of questions and dominate the conversation. He had that right because I was there only to clarify any technical issue on NEA's efforts if it came up. So we went to her office in the West Wing, just the three of us, and chit chatted, not me but Keith and Debra. She impressed and she demonstrated she could remember names. I said at one point I had one question and she turned to me and asked "What question is that John?" I liked that.

That reminds of a story. The Clintons had key people who pushed health care reform. They hired Harold Ickes, the son of the FDR's Secretary of the Interior. Ickes the son was a great warrior in the Civil Rights battles. But I must say he appeared to me tightly wired, that's the best way I can comment. Ken Melley had a meeting with Ickes at the Jefferson Hotel, one of Ken's favorite water holes, and he asked me to come along as the meeting was about health reform. At the beginning of the meeting Ken says to Ickes "We are here to talk about health reform and I got my man here who knows all about it." And Ickes immediately says "I don't care about that shit, how many votes can you deliver?"

VS I guess that's politics. I have one last thing I want to talk about. Feel free to continue, if you have anything else you want to mention. Again going back a bit, you had talked about Don Cameron always felt like Al Shanker could do whatever he wanted, for example merit pay.

JD And charter schools.

VS Yes charter schools. Yet someone at NEA couldn't do that and had to walk a fine line. My understanding is that's what NEA president Bob Chase's New Unionism was about, right, because like merit pay it was an issue. How did that play out? I mean was it supported generally within the association? Did you have any problems with it?

JD If I remember correctly Chase was elected '96 and I think he gave his New Unionism speech at the Press Club in like February, 1997. And we began working to implement that. I was put in charge of a committee that Chase had formed to write out an action plan for New Unionism. We did that in September, 1997 and that was the last thing I did for NEA as I retired in January, 1998.

My impression is, and only an impression, is that in '98 or 2000 when Chase left NEA, New Unionism had been sidetracked by the political problems over merging with AFT.

When I retired the major issue in New Unionism was peer evaluation and review. It was being criticized from a number of people, including Bob Chanin. Chanin's basic position was that if you turned teachers into evaluators, you would take them out of bargaining units.

I can't say I know what happened after that but one local, Montgomery County in Maryland, did embrace peer evaluation through the efforts of its executive director and an NEA leader, Mark Simon. I gather it was successful, well received as teachers were directly involved in improving the instructional abilities of other teachers. Maryland's bargaining was different from those in New Jersey and Michigan where those who effectively evaluated employees could not be in the bargaining unit. So there were internal tensions and I don't know how they were resolved. I may have just slipped out of view.

Teacher collective bargaining was in many ways a true movement. It captured the emotions of the time. People got swept up in and said this works, let's push it. No issue in the education reform movement ever generated that sort of impetus. When A Nation at Risk came out there were fifty million schemes about how to reform education and NEA scrambled to find out which ones it could support. One was site based decision making, which would put more decision making in the hands of teachers in specific school buildings. But that promoted fragmentation as outcomes from building to building could be variable and hard to track. It never gained any real impetus.

Cameron certainly believed, as did many others, that the only viable reform was that which came from the bottom up. Just let reform efforts rise up. One such program was Mastery of Learning overseen by Bob McClure. It was a good program of organizing at the building level around instructional issues. It was well conceived but it was a very intensive process and required a lot of staff support and input. It required training up people so they could go in and implement the program.

State associations facing all the reform ventures were running around like chickens with their heads cut off trying to meet the demands of each reform notion.

Another NEA reform program, headed up by Bob Barkley, was Learning Labs and TABS, both site based decision making programs. The problem with all NEA reform efforts was that it was difficult to scale them up. You couldn't get them beyond a here and there as they were too complex.

Collective bargaining was something that could be easily sold> From a propaganda perspective if you have to spend a lot of time explaining something, it is not likely to catch on. It's like a researcher going through the archives of the International Fund and finally falling asleep. There may be gems in the records but it takes an effort to sort them out.

VS That's one we are trying to do with these oral history interviews, trying to help people find gems, what they might be interested in and find useful. I guess I hadn't seen it like that. I've always seen collective bargaining as a constant looking through the archives finding things the the 1930 statistics comparing teacher pay with other professionals. And I see the collective bargaining as maybe frustrating, change didn't really occur over the 50 years of its existence so why not try something different?

JD Well, that's one way to look at. Another way is to see it as an evolutionary process. That is what I did as a teacher of a course for NEA staff called NEA as a Union. Take teacher tenure. Most education reform efforts in the early 20th century came out of Columbia University and their ideas would filter down to NEA staff and get translated into practice. That is the story of teacher tenure. Same for teacher retirement. NEA Research collected and published statistics on these issues so districts could compare themselves with other districts. But it was all being driven by superintendents, the top echelon of every school district. They wanted these things. One of the ironies is that the single salary schedule based on experience and education came from superintendents because it allowed them to efficiently manage a school district by predicting costs year to year. Tenure wasn't a union creation either, but designed to shield teachers from political hazards in their daily working lives.

From an evolutionary standpoint NEA always had the seeds of being a good employee advocate union. Or more accurately a better employee advocate at the state and local levels. Remember, NEA was created by state associations. State associations were good lobbyists at the state level. But members wanted a greater sense of involvement and that is what collective bargaining gave them. It gave them the sense that they could directly influence policy decisions.

Don Cameron tells a story, it may be in his book, I don't remember. Before collective bargaining local associations would have salary committee. Don started teaching before Michigan had a collective bargaining law and he served on the Birmingham Education Association salary committee. He and his fellow committee people took the job seriously and worked up charts helped by MEA. They presented their findings and recommendations to the school board who sat there saying "this is very good." They had data, reasons, arguments all well documented

before them. The board then said, “Thank you very much, believe us, we appreciate your effort but we’ve already determined the raise you will receive this year.” It was all very frustrating. Collective bargaining changed that process. They couldn’t just hand us what they determined, they had to at least listen to us in a way that, as the U.S. Supreme Court said, did not evince a mind hermetically sealed from persuasion.

VS I guess as a final thought, and even though you left NEA a while back, do you have any comment on what has happened in Wisconsin and the move to right to work laws. A new administration is coming in that might change everything. Do you have any lost thoughts on your legacy and what you’ve seen over the last twenty years?

JD Not really, what I see is history unfolding. I don’t think I left any legacy at NEA. It was a moment in time and we all seized, or tried to seize, the moment. It was a lot of fun most often than not. Fun in a good way. We thought we were doing good for teachers. I always felt that, I think everybody felt that. Don Cameron and Ken Melley thought that, giving teachers a voice that they did have in the councils of the mighty.

What I have trouble understanding right now is the fragmentation created by social media. How do you organize, given the fact that there are so many outlets of information? Clearly an organizer today must have social media connections with everyone he/she is dealing with, to a degree I never had to deal with. I was more monkish. I had expertise and people could accept or ignore it. Today expertise is greatly depreciated because everybody has instant access to a lot of information that we didn’t have back when. I would love to have been at a bargaining table with an IPAD. I could have answered every question the school board raised on merit pay with a simple press of my finger.

Today dynamics are different and the cohesion necessary for any mass organization is more difficult to obtain. Collective bargaining in many ways promoted that cohesion. It seems to me achieving internal cohesion is more difficult than it was thirty, forty, or fifty years ago.

Asking me how to organize in 2017 would be like a soldier in World War I asking a Civil War veteran how to fight a modern war. You have the same principles like “surprise the enemy” but how do you do that when things have changed so radically. Same holds true with organizing, the principles are the same but I don’t see them being able to be implemented on a wider scale. The guru of organizing, I forget his name, he wrote a biography of John L. Lewis, made a distinction between an organizer and a business agent. If you went into a local association after someone had been fired and acted like a lawyer talking about a hearing before the board, you would be a business agent. But if you asked the person fired who were all his friends and then worked to get them in a room together and activate them—make them mad, kick the managers in the shins—you would be an organizer. To be able to that in this day and age seems to me very difficult given the impact of social media. Organizing is promoting group identity and I don’t see that as an easy process today. I just don’t.

VS Okay!

(end of interview)